

Public Financing of Political Campaigns -- the Next Step in the Battle for Control of America

By Rep. Bob Filner

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A few weeks ago, after seven years of debate and delay, the House of Representatives finally acted to take some of the private money out of the campaign finance system. Some of the money.

But the scales of power are still drastically tilted against the average citizen.

The campaign finance reform bill passed by the House and now being considered by the Senate is full of loopholes. This bill may give even more power to special interest groups. It doubles the amount that individuals can contribute to Congressional campaigns. And, although national political parties would face new restrictions, corporations, unions and multimillionaires could give \$10,000 (instead of \$5,000) to state political parties.

I voted for the bill because it eliminates the \$200,000 checks blatantly used by big corporations to pay for certain laws to be passed. But I think that true campaign reform must remove all private money from the system. As long as we continue to let private money keep our public officials in office, our political system will be subject to corruption.

If you are like most people, you don't have \$2,000 in your couch cushions. So if you are like most people, you should be concerned about the ongoing dominance of private money in your campaign system.

Why? Consider the following scenario:

The phone rings. It is you. A citizen of the United States of America. You are trying to call your representative, "Congressman Smith." You need some help.

Maybe they're going to build a freeway through your backyard. Maybe they want to build a factory across the street from your kid's school. Maybe you want to express your disgust with some budgetary boondoggle.

So you need some help. But there's a problem.

You see, the freeway builders gave Congressman Smith \$30,000 in his last campaign. The factory builders gave him \$50,000. The defense contractor who makes a tank the military doesn't even want ensured the Congressman got \$20,000.

When you call him and ask for help, Congressman Smith should care. After all, that's his job. He is supposed to represent you.

But if he wants to keep his job, he'll probably do what his big donors want. The freeway or factory or tank will get built.

Money is power. Money can buy television ads -- seen by tens of thousands of voters. Money can print and mail full-color glossy brochures to tens of thousands of voters. Money can buy access to a Congressman. Money can buy access to a governor. Money can buy access to a president.

Political campaigns cost money. Maybe we can't control that. But we can control where that money comes from.

I suggest that we need to do more than simply reform the corrupt campaign finance system in this country. We need to remove it! We need to end it! We should no longer allow private corporations or multimillionaires to give ANY money to a Congressional (or state or local) campaign.

Eliminating the private money could eliminate private influence on our government.

Changes like this could occur at the local level in cities throughout our country! In my district in San Diego, one local organization, the San Diego Alliance for Clean Elections, has an intriguing proposal. SDACE proposes that a city council candidate who gathers three hundred \$5 donations should receive public financing for her campaign.

This means that funds to pay for campaigns would come from we, the people! Some will certainly balk at public money going to pay for campaigns, but they should consider the current alternative: Your city councilmember, brought to you by Big Developer, Inc.

The SDACE campaign finance proposal limits the public cost to 0.5% of the city's general fund. That comes to only \$3 per resident -- a small price to pay for removing big corporations, developers and special interests from city politics!

And if the SDACE proposal passes, running for office would no longer be reserved for a privileged few. Public officials would be able to vote without consideration for the impact that a vote might have on future campaign contributions. The freeway might not come through your backyard. The factory might not be built across from your school. Unnecessary pork projects might disappear.

Public campaign financing is an idea that has worked in Arizona, Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont. It could work in San Diego too. And with enough regional success, public campaign financing could be expanded nationwide. Our government could again be truly "of the people, by the people, and for the people!"

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